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CAN WE TEACH APPRECIATION OF POETRY?

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In modest emulation of Dr. Parker, whose book on *Methods of Teaching in High Schools* has become almost a pedagogical Bible, I shall substitute for the term "appreciation" the more definite term "enjoyment." The subject under consideration will then read, "Can we teach enjoyment of poetry?"

Most of us who teach English have at some time or other tried to make every pupil understand every word of every poem, look up all possible and impossible references, and examine with microscopic view every idea presented by the poet, until all conception of the poem as a unit has been forever lost in a chaotic mass of detail. Such a method in teaching poetry is "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." A poem presented in such a way can mean but one thing to the pupil—a wearisome procession of geographic and historical facts, adjectives and adverbs, pentameters and caesuras, ending in detestation of the very word poetry. This emphasis upon form rather than upon content is happily becoming a part of ancient history, while the development of genuine feeling and real enjoyment is taking first place in the teaching of poetry.

Fortunately for us most normal children possess an instinctive sense of rhythm, which becomes evident very early in life—for example, in the response to the mother's lullaby. Someone may object to this statement because a sense of rhythm in a young child

does not necessarily indicate a love of poetry later on. That is true, yet this same unconscious sense of rhythm which reacts to the regular verse-beat of the mother's song is not waste material, but under skilful direction may later prove rich soil for the seeds of poetic appreciation. This innate sense of rhythm is evident, not only in the child's early love of musical sounds, but also in his delight in "Mother Goose" and kindred rhymes.

From the "Mother Goose" rhymes the step is but a short one to the wide field of poetry for children. We are told that genuine feeling for poetry is often awakened through "versified, musical language," and these musical sounds open up to the child's imagination "a world of mystery and wonder." This feeling for poetry frequently leads the child, entirely of his own accord, to put rhythm into his words. For example, I remember hearing of a little girl who said to her mother, "Mother, I have made up a sort of a "im," and this was the "im":

Dance in the parlor,
Dance in the hall,
God made us all.

Not so *far* removed from the psalms of David!

Upon this instinctive poetic sense of the child, vague though it may be, we should be able to build a genuine enjoyment of poetry. The child is essentially an image-maker; he has entire faith in his "world of illusion." Professor Fairchild believes that "through his poetry he becomes aware of himself as a person; he renews and strengthens his own sense of identity. It is this same activity, involving the same processes, reaching the same ends, showing the same kind of value wherever it appears, that enables the child later on to accept, even with joy, truer and more serious representations which do not conform in so absolute a way either to the dictates of his own will or to the volatile desires of his own heart." This desirable result is not achieved without skilful guidance. It is this fleeting quality, this faith, that the teacher of the adolescent must catch and hold. Evasive as the one hair on the otherwise bald head of Fortune, it must yet be seized. For in the years preceding adolescence many childish illusions have been shattered; the boy

of fourteen finds many things hard to believe which he accepted without question at six. Then, too, the present emphasis upon the vocational side of life as opposed to the cultural side leaves little opportunity for the development of the imagination, and in the case of poetry this difficulty has not been diminished by a certain widespread feeling that poetry is of little consequence. The ever-increasing cry, "What is it worth to me in dollars and cents?" is invading the field of English as well as the field of Greek and Roman classics. Surely there is a *via media* between the old pedagogy of the ultra-cultural and the new pedagogy of the ultra-material, but it is hard indeed for the teacher of poetry to find this *via media* when even doctors disagree.

With all these influences, direct and indirect, working against us, we teachers of English are facing the task of reawakening the imagination, of reopening—or perhaps opening—to our students the world of fancy. It is a pity that a child should go through life without a glimpse into this beautiful world—the world of Shelley's "Skylark," of Noyes's "Our Lady of the Twilight."

As the young child is an image-maker, so his elder brother is a bundle of feeling; and "poetry begins and ends in feeling." We realize that teaching must deal with the sentiment as well as with the understanding. Our ultimate appeal then is to the feeling of our students and through their feelings to that intense desire of the adolescent to do something great, something noble. With this idea in mind, may we consider for a moment the moral appeal in poetry? Though any direct teaching of morals through poetry is harshly decried at the present time, the fact remains that a fine poem often drives home an important and vital truth. Some pupils will absorb the moral lesson without any guidance, but some will not. As children do not enjoy being trapped into listening to a sermon out of church hours, this moral appeal must be sufficiently indirect that the child may not feel that he is being preached at—the teacher must decide how much guidance his student may need in adapting the theme of the poem to his own life. No exact pedagogical rule can be laid down for such a lesson. This adaptation of the moral issue of a poem to the pupil's own life does not spoil his pleasure in the poem; on the contrary, it enhances his enjoyment. In the reaction

from the old method of making all poetry merely a vehicle for a flabby kind of sermon, the pendulum has swung so far in the other direction that we are in danger of passing too lightly over all moral issues. May I illustrate? Most of us emphasize in our classes the value of making the most of our opportunities. In one class within the range of my observation the poem "Opportunity" was taken up by the class and teacher. The language was studied, the story visualized, and the lesson clearly brought out. Will you think that the teaching of the moral issue spoiled the enjoyment of the poem when I tell you that, with *no* direction on the part of the teacher, all but two of the members of the class memorized the poem? The teacher must find a point of contact between the life of the pupil and the content of the poem; in this one it is easy, because boys hate a quitter, and they like to see a "fellow play the game" as the king's son did. In this development of a moral lesson and its application to the lives of the students they will delight in illustrating the theme from their own experiences. Any football player can apply this little poem. With skilful guidance on the part of the teacher, a class will find also that Cassius is alive today, and as unpopular as in the days of Caesar; that Hamlet is present, as lacking in nerve and decision as in the days of long ago; and through these plays a boy may learn to despise conspiracy and hate irresolution. I think, however, that I hear someone say, "Why not let the pupil apply these lessons to his own life, without any assistance?" Because many—too many—will miss the point. As teachers, I believe we are too much inclined to convince ourselves that our pupils have grasped an idea when the idea is really confused, or at best vague, to them. I imagine that someone else is saying, "Why cannot these lessons be taught as effectively through prose as through poetry?" To a certain extent they can be, and I should certainly condemn any course in literature containing poetry only, but the poetic language or the beautiful imagery of poetry frequently makes a thought more attractive than the same idea in prose. (A Christmas gift in brown wrapping paper may be as valuable as the same article dressed up in tissue paper and red ribbon, but the latter is far more attractive.) But much more important than the fact of its attractiveness is the thought that,

as Emerson said, "Poetry is the only verity," and that poets, according to Mrs. Browning, are—

The only truth-tellers of God,
The only speakers of essential truth,
Opposed to the relative, comparative,
And temporal truth; the only holders-by
His sun-skirts, through conventual gray glooms;
The only teachers who instruct mankind
From just a shadow on a charnal wall
To find man's veritable stature out,
Erect, sublime—the measure of a man.

This development of a moral sense through the application of poetry to the child's own experience is so closely allied to the development of feeling that it is merely another phase of the same idea. Fine feeling, genuine sympathy, is inherently moral. Children like to feel, they enjoy being "all worked up," as our grandmothers used to say; but they are not likely to respond quickly to the emotional appeal unless someone helps them. Here the teacher must play an active part. It is his task to arouse feeling without permitting it to degenerate into mere sentimentality; his task to see that this feeling, once awakened, actually functions in the pupil's life. And how can he do this? The teacher who possesses imagination puts himself in the pupil's place, looks at the poem—be it narrative or lyric—with the child's eyes, and—most important of all—*feels* the way that he hopes to make his pupils feel. We who look upon "The Courtship of Miles Standish" as commonplace—partly because we were taught at college that Longfellow's poetry was somewhat ordinary, partly because we have read it so many times that it ceases to appeal—we are the ones who need this warning; no matter whether this be our sixth or our sixtieth reading, unless we genuinely deplore John Alden's lack of perfect truth, unless we truly censure the unjust anger of Standish, unless we actually hear in our own hearts the signal gun of departure, we cannot hope to stimulate in our boys and girls any genuine feeling. But if we do lead them to even a partial understanding of the joy or grief of others, who can measure the results in their service to the community? I sometimes think it is sympathy and not love "that makes the world go round." In teaching *Macbeth*, unless we thrill with horror at the murder of Lady

Macduff; unless we enter heart and soul into the despair of Macbeth as he feels the iron walls of the dungeon he has built for himself closing in about him, we fail to awaken the sympathetic interest of our pupils. They are quick to detect any sham feeling; it is of no use to tell them that they must feel this way or that unless our own feeling is genuine. The face, the voice of the teacher, tell his students more than his words ever can. In connection with this point may I suggest that it is a mistake to risk the spoiling of a beautiful passage by a blundering, incoherent reading, and that the first oral reading of a poem should be done by the teacher? Then let the pupils read it back to the teacher—repetition cannot spoil a beautiful poem. The pupils love to listen to good reading, and then to read themselves. An intelligent and sympathetic reading by the teacher is an important factor in the pupils' enjoyment of poetry.

Another factor in the development of feeling is the examination of certain words. You may not agree with me, as the study of words seems a far cry from emotional reading. A verse or two from *Macbeth* may serve to illustrate this point. In the last act Macbeth expresses his own fear in the various names which he calls the bearer of ill tidings—"whey-face, linen cheeks, lily-livered boy"—expressing his own dread which he dare not voice. When a student comprehends the full significance of those words, or of such an expression as "Hang those who talk of fear," he can enter more fully into Macbeth's desperate anxiety. Doesn't every boy know how it feels to quake inwardly at the thought of a dangerous dive or a risky jump and yet to try to conceal his own fright by accusing the other fellow of being afraid? The more he feels, the more he sympathizes, the more intensely he enjoys. The consideration of word-study in its relation to the intellectual side of poetry will be taken up later.

Not only may our students enjoy poetry when they are led to feel and to sympathize, but they also enjoy finding their own vague ideas and experiences expressed for them. We are told that "the use of poetry is to give man knowledge of his unrecognized capacities of feeling. The poet speaks what many have felt, but what none save him can say. The joy of a moment has been fixed for all time; the throb, gone almost before it is felt, he has made captive; to the evasive emotion he has given immortality." I know of one boy

just out of high school who has on his bureau, where he reads it every day, a copy of "If." When I asked him why he chose that particular poem, he said, "Because it says for me all the things I've been trying to say for myself and couldn't; I just vaguely felt them." In connection with this division of my topic I should like to say just a word about the teaching of poems that deal with the subject of love, particularly the love between a man and a woman. I know that many teachers pass very hastily over such a theme, fearing that it will seem silly to the students. I believe that is a mistake. The present tendency of high-school students is to cheapen love, to make of it a joke and a plaything, and every poem that makes it a beautiful and sacred thing is an indirect influence toward a better attitude. It is true that at first the student, as well as the teacher, may seem somewhat conscious; but, whether he admits it or not, he is soon interested. As high-school boys and girls are continually falling in and out of love, the idea of love, at least, is within their own experience, and a teacher can easily make them realize the beauty of a poem whose theme is love.

As most children are gifted with a strong imagination, they take real delight in forming mental pictures of what they read. I agree with Miss Bolenius in her statement that "the use of pictures is the greatest of all aids in developing keenness of visualization." I know of one class whose members last year took great delight in collecting pictures from the scenes of Shakespeare's plays. These pictures, cut out of newspapers and magazines and mounted on art paper, proved invaluable in interpreting the plays.

Our discussion so far has been confined to the problem of teaching enjoyment of poetry through the feeling, with little or no reference to any strictly intellectual appeal. It is difficult to determine just how much technical work will enhance the enjoyment rather than interfere with it. Some reference work, such as a study of the setting of the poem, seems necessary to any understanding of the poem. I believe, however, that in the first year of the high school such references, historical or geographical, should be given by the teacher. Let the students make notes of these references and use them in interpreting the poem. For example, the "Courtship of Miles Standish," read usually in the first or second year of high school, needs some explanation by the teacher, who can give

the historical background vividly and keep it before the students as they read the poem. Shelley's "Skylark" would mean little to a student unless the nature and habits of the bird were explained to him, but I have known teachers to make a lesson on the "Skylark" a recitation in biology. A few words of explanation by the teacher are sufficient. In the older classes, however, some research work with regard to the historical background or a kindred topic will stimulate the interest of the pupil rather than detract from it. A discussion of the moving cause or the turning-point in a dramatic poem will not obstruct the student's view of the poem as a whole. Such a topic as "The hawking terms used in *Macbeth*" may throw light upon some of the passages, and such a study will stimulate the mind. The teacher should constantly subordinate such study, however, to the real point at issue, keeping in mind that it is merely a means to an end and not in itself an end.

The study of the poetic word or phrase is almost always a source of keen pleasure to a student. I remember that Superintendent Coughlin used to recite a little poem to a class, and when he came to the verse "From sun-rise to star-rise" he asked the children to improve upon that line. They experimented with various equivalent expressions, but always came back with real delight to the original verse, "From sun-rise to star-rise." The pupils soon learn to distinguish for themselves the poetic words and phrases. The discussion of the fitness of a word to the occasion forms a most interesting study. For example, an inquiry into Edward Sill's reason for using such an inharmonious phrase as "swords shocked upon swords and shields," in contrast to the smoothness and melody of his other lines, is always interesting to the student and increases his respect for the poet. We must resist the temptation, however, to carry this word-study so far that we lose sight of the poem as a unit. As Dr. Baker warned us, we are sometimes in danger of "losing sight of the forest because of the trees."

In spite of all the pitfalls that yawn at the feet of every teacher of English, in spite of the indirect influences that are working against us, I do believe, not only that we can teach enjoyment of poetry, but that we are actually doing so. I believe that our pupils' lives are fuller and richer for the fact that we are holding before them the great masterpieces of poetic literature.